

Principles and Practice of Forensic Autopsy

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History of Forensic Autopsy

The earliest recorded forensic autopsy dates back to 44 BCE and involved the assassination of Julius Caesar. After Caesar was stabbed to death by Roman senators, a Roman physician named Antistius conducted an external examination of his body. Antistius documented 23 stab wounds and concluded that only one—the wound beneath Caesar’s left shoulder blade was fatal.

In the 13th century, Guglielmo de Placentinus Saliceto (1210–1277), a physician from the University of Bologna, Italy, described a forensic autopsy in his book *Surgery*, written in 1275. However, it remains unclear whether his examination included internal inspection or was limited to external observation. A more definitive account of a full forensic autopsy was provided by Bartolomeo da Varignana, another Italian physician and professor of medicine, in the year 1302.

Ambroise Paré—Pioneer of Forensic Pathology

French barber-surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510–1590) is often regarded as one of the founding fathers of forensic pathology and surgery (**Fig. 1.1**). He performed a judicial autopsy in 1562, setting a precedent for future legal autopsies.

Paré’s work explored the effects of violent deaths on internal organs, distinguishing between antemortem and postmortem injuries, lightning-related fatalities, and carbon monoxide poisoning. He also authored *Reports in Court*, a guidebook on writing medical-legal reports. His writings mark a significant turning point in the evolution of forensic pathology.



Fig. 1.1: Ambroise Paré

First Forensic Autopsy in India

India’s first documented forensic autopsy was conducted in 1693 by Edward Bulkley, a naturalist and surgeon employed by the British East India Company. The case involved the death of James Wheeler, a member of the Council of Madras.

Wheeler was under the care of Dr Samuel Browne, whose assistant had reportedly used a pestle and mortar that had previously been used to grind pearls for a supposed remedy involving arsenic. Suspicions of poisoning led to an investigation. Bulkley’s autopsy determined that arsenic was not the cause of death, and his findings played a crucial role in the acquittal of Dr Browne.